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# Landscapes of empathy: spatial scenarios, metaphors and metonymies in responses to distant suffering

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## Abstract

*This study re-analyzes focus group data on responses to human rights abuses, to investigate how participants' experiences in their local social and physical worlds influence empathy with distant suffering others.*

*Metaphors, metonymies, narratives, and typifying scenarios were identified in the discourse dynamics. Scenarios, metaphors, and metonymies of space and place emerge as particularly significant in the dialogic co-construction of moral reasoning. Embodied experiences, specifically encounters with people begging in the street, become emblematic of perceived threats to personal space that should feel private and secure. Systematic spatial metaphors construct a landscape of empathic understanding with an optimal distance for empathy, neither too close nor too far. Faced with distant suffering others in prompt materials, participants respond with parallel reasoning on the symbolic landscape. Implications for increasing empathic understanding of distant others are discussed.*

*Keywords:* empathy; metaphor; spatial; human rights abuses.

## 1. Introduction

(1)<sup>1</sup>

- 625 Tracey: it was always easier to think  
626            ⟨Q oh that's over there,  
627            it doesn't need to affect me Q⟩  
628 Bruna: uhm.  
629 Tracey: but with more of the wars going on  
630            and I suppose we must take in more refugees  
631            in Britain,  
632            then you are faced,

633                   you see more and more people who are sufferers,  
 634                   it's brought it all home to you erm  
 635                   so I don't think it's as easy to pretend,  
 636                   you know,  
 637                   ⟨Q well that's nothing to do with us,  
 638                   it's not happening. Q⟩

Tracey acknowledges how global conflict contributes to social change in her local neighborhood, and how personal experience has changed her understanding of distant suffering. She discursively constructs an experiential scenario of seeing and encountering *refugees* and *sufferers*; she invokes imagined conversations as part of her dialogic moral reasoning, and employs spatial metaphors—*take in*, *faced*, and *brought it all home*—that highlight emotions connected with that reasoning.

Seu's original study (Seu 2003, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Cohen and Seu 2002) applied critical discourse analysis and discursive analysis to discussions about human rights appeals,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that denial of social responsibility toward sufferers is an operation of power and knowledge production that sustains and colludes with more systemic, official operations of passivity and denial (Seu 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Here we focus on the dynamics of empathy to offer a complementary reading of participants' accounts as expressive of emotional tensions and ambivalence experienced when confronted with suffering others.<sup>3</sup> Metaphor-led discourse analysis is applied to explore the contribution of figurative language and thinking, particularly spatial metaphors, to empathy toward suffering others, encountered physically or through visual/written communication as charity appeals or information.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. *Metaphor and embodiment*

Metaphor-led discourse analysis offers a powerful method to investigate the dynamics of ideas and emotions in dialogue (e.g., Cameron 2003, 2011a). Cameron's discourse dynamics approach examines dialogue as a complex dynamic system, extracting and interpreting trajectories of connected verbal metaphors that frame key themes and voice speakers' emotions and attitudes (Cameron and Maslen 2010; Cameron et al. 2009).<sup>4</sup> The approach sees individuals in dialogue adaptively drawing on culturally shared repertoires of verbal metaphors and cultural models (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Quinn 1991); conversely, collective identities are partly constituted through shared verbal metaphors (Cooper 1986; Musolff 2007). It differs from strong versions of

conceptual metaphor theory (e.g., Lakoff 2008) in not assuming pre-existing conceptual metaphors in speakers' minds.

To this dynamic sociocultural view of metaphor are added ideas from embodied cognition that connect perception and physical experience with feeling, reasoning, and understanding. Embodied cognition suggests that we know and understand the world through experiences with it. Neuroscience offers explanation through simulation theory, in which mirror neuron activation lets us make sense of other people's actions, perceptions, and emotions in terms of our own (Barsalou 2008), and through somatic markers, as stored patterns of feelings associated with particular embodied experiences that are activated when similar experiences are re-encountered (Damasio 1994). Because metaphors often draw on common experiences in the physical world to express abstract meanings, they are likely to activate memories of embodied experiences and associated emotions (Casasanto 2009; Gibbs 2006a, 2006b; Ritchie 2006).

While metaphor helps people to talk about the abstract and unknowable in more physical and concrete terms, it also works affectively, often carrying attitudes, feelings, and evaluations, particularly when these are negative (Cameron 2003; Deignan 2010). Consider, for example, the mention of refugees in Extract (1). Tracey's metaphor of *faced (with)* in line 632 is not positive; it is overwhelmingly used to refer to something threatening or dangerous (Deignan and Semino 2010). A Google search shows the phrase collocated with *a gun, an injury crisis, reputation risk, rebellious parliament, big funding cuts*. In its physical sense, *faced with* implies seeing, because the eyes are in the face. Through its social conventionalization as metaphor, it carries a strong sense of feeling threatened by something dangerous in front of one's eyes. Tracey adjusts in the next line to a more neutral *you see*, but the following metaphor, *brought it all home*, again emphasizes the affective. Because *home* matters experientially as the place where one feels most comfortable and secure, metaphorically moving something negative closer to *home* implies potential threat as well as increased visibility. By examining affective force attached to people's metaphors, even those highly conventionalized, analysis can suggest attitudinal and evaluative patterns (Cameron 2007).

Space and place have long been recognized as offering potential for metaphor and cultural symbolism. Bachelard (1994 [1958]) examined the house as home and living space in terms of metaphors, stories, and symbols, which led to the development of the field of "geopoetics," and its sub-field of "social geography." In social anthropology, Hall's "proxemics" (1968) accounted for findings about people's preferred distances from others, introducing the idea of "personal space." Current anthropological thinking focuses less on space as location and more as constituted by social interaction that occurs within it and by movement through it (Lagopoulos 2009; Lefebvre 1991; Low 2000, 2009; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964).

In her study of metaphor and empathy in reconciliation, Cameron (2011a) found that places acted as symbolic carriers of emotions and understandings, through memories of significant events that happened in them or roles that they played in the conflict. As we explore further below, the ambivalence expressed metaphorically in Extract (1) as threatening movement of *refugees* into the speaker's personal space (*face, home*) could be further deconstructed as a perceived threat to the familiar geopolitical and hierarchical order and the speaker's position of power within it.

## 2.2. *Empathy*

The central act of empathy, which provides a social-psychological and dialogic construct for the study, is imagining the feelings and perspectives of "the Other." Empathy involves understandings across social, cultural, political, and personal differences, and can require people to deal with possible ambivalence arising from those differences (Halpern and Weinstein 2004). Empathy is essentially an individual response to the perceived Other; in the dialogic perspective adopted here, the individual is never separable from the social, and occupies multiple collective positions/identities deriving from membership of multiple social groups. The term "empathy" has come to cover a multiplicity of processes and phenomena (Cameron 2010, 2011b): a disposition that affects interaction; an intentional attitude; a moral or ethical choice; a specific act of imagining or entering the world of the other; a mode of attending to the other; an automatic response to something seen or heard, such as the expression on someone else's face or what they say. This study contributes to the multilevel model of empathy dynamics being developed in the larger project that connects face-to-face activity into empathic relations across social groups.

In focus groups, participants come together as strangers to engage in discussion mediated by a moderator. What people say and do "in the moment" is influenced by their prior experiences, attitudes, and beliefs as individuals and as members of various social groups, and by their fellow participants. As they discuss the merits and demerits of charity appeals and information about human rights abuses, they express feelings about relations between themselves and suffering others, explicitly and implicitly. We do not engage here with the rhetorical and ideological operations underlying participants' accounting for their moral decision making, but focus instead on a fine-grained analysis of their metaphors. By examining verbal metaphors in the dialogue, we aim to articulate and examine connections between people's experience in the physical world and their understandings, reasoning, and decision making, making visible how these metaphors foster or block empathic engagement with the suffering Other.

### 2.3. *The original study*

The original study asked why audiences remained passive in response to distant suffering. Seu (2010, 2011a, 2011b) argues that audience passivity cannot be understood as a mono-causal phenomenon, but should be approached as a complex psychosocial “dynamic equilibrium” between socially determined forces, constellations of emotional reactions and denial operations. Equally crucial is how audiences agentically engage with these factors in their relation to each other, holding unstable and ambivalent positions as they respond to human rights appeals and information.

Strongly influenced by Cohen (1996, 2001) and Van Dijk (1992), it was argued that denial comes in many forms, each with its own cognitive, emotional, social, political, and cultural functions. Crucially, denials were considered part of the strategy of defense, presupposing implicit or explicit accusations, or as pre-emptive (Van Dijk 1992: 91), consisting of culturally available accounts and justifications that form the “vocabulary” of moral passivity within society.

This article’s focus on empathy and metaphor complements Seu’s discursive and psychosocial approach by expanding our understanding of the role of emotions in audience passivity. While Seu primarily focused on emotional reactions to information about atrocities and denial operations toward appeal makers, here we concentrate on how distant suffering and its various manifestations map onto people’s emotional boundaries. Examining how spatial metaphors are adaptively drawn on as part of participants’ interpretive repertoires allows insights into emotions and ambivalences in accounts of denial. These insights in turn engage with what drives participants to respond as they do and reconnects denial to their particular physical and sociocultural contexts.

## 3. Data and method

### 3.1. *Data*

In the focus group discussion, images and text bring the distant suffering Other to the attention of participants, prompting reactions and discussion of decisions about giving to charities and helping others.

One of the nine groups in the original study provides data for this new study. Participants were five women, aged between 32 and 52, living in London, who defined themselves as working class. Recruited through advertisements asking for volunteers to participate in an informal discussion about human rights abuses, four of the women (Stacey, Paula, Kate, and Tracey) were white (three specified “white British”), while one (Carla) was Indian and the only graduate.<sup>5</sup>

Participants were given three visual and textual prompts: an appeal from an Amnesty International campaign for Afghanistan, describing how a woman

left her children at home while she went in search of food, was abducted by soldiers, held and raped for days, and then found her children dead of hypothermia. The second appeal, from an Amnesty International campaign against torture, pictured a steam-iron and asked readers to imagine it next to their faces. The third was an article from the liberal British newspaper, *The Guardian*, on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, with a photo of a man lying on the floor being flogged and the headline “West ‘turns a blind eye’ to Saudi torture”.

The second author conducted the focus groups using an interview schedule that covered emotional and cognitive reactions to appeals about human rights abuses, if and where they had seen human rights appeals, responses to appeals, and their models of human rights.

The discussion lasted around 90 minutes, was transcribed, and for this study converted into approximate intonation units on the basis of transcribed pauses and syntactic clues to clause completion points (Chafe 1994; du Bois et al. 1993; Ford and Thompson 1996; Stelma and Cameron 2007). The conversion was done for purposes of analytic convenience (importing into software for coding), and to align with other transcriptions analyzed by the first author. While we aimed for consistency across the transcription, analysis did not require a high level of accuracy in marking intonation units.

### 3.2. Data analysis

Metaphor-led discourse analysis begins by identifying metaphors—more accurately, “metaphor vehicles”—in transcribed data. To be identified as a metaphor vehicle, (i) a word or phrase must have some other different sense, called its basic meaning, usually more physical or more concrete than its contextual meaning, and (ii) the basic meaning of the word or phrase must contribute to the contextual meaning (Cameron et al. 2009; praggeljaz group 2007). No assumptions are made as to speakers’ intentions or listeners’ interpretations; the concern is only meeting the two criteria.

In the example, *it is a pressurised world*, *pressurised* is identified as a metaphor vehicle because there is another, different, meaning, about physical pressure or force, contributing to the contextual meaning of life as busy and stressful.

*World* is also used figuratively, but as metonymy rather than metaphor. In metonymy, basic and contextual meanings (geographic world and social world, respectively) are not different but connected. Metonymy includes synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole, as well as other relations of contiguity.

Once identified, metaphor vehicles are grouped together by their basic meanings: *pressurised* is grouped with, for example, *rammed down their throat*, as *PHYSICAL FORCE* vehicles. By examining metaphors used to talk about key discourse topics, we can find out how metaphors systematically frame

ideas, in this case to give a sense of *EVERYDAY LIFE AS SUBJECT TO PHYSICAL FORCE*.<sup>6</sup> Because metaphors often carry affect—emotions, attitudes, values—framing metaphors also reveal how people feel about the topics. To describe the pace of life as *pressurised* or receiving information as *rammed down their throat* underlines the associated negative and helpless feelings.

Key discourse topics were identified by describing what was being talked about in each turn, generating a short list that adequately covers the discussion:<sup>7</sup>

- Places
  - in the neighborhood
  - distant
- Beggars and other people physically asking for money
- Charities and their requests for money
- Social change

Since systematicity of metaphor and metonymy also manifests itself in narratives of various types (Cameron et al. 2010; Ritchie 2010), metaphor-led discourse analysis also codes data for narratives. Two types of narrative are particularly prevalent in focus groups: personal stories told by participants, and more generalized “typifying scenarios” (Myers 1999). A personal story is usually told in the past tense, recounts a series of linked events with an outcome, and is often signaled by some discourse marker like *once*. A typifying scenario is less specific, usually focuses less on events and outcome, and more on settings and “characters,” and often uses *you* pronouns and present tenses. Extract (2) is an example of a typifying scenario, with setting (*where I work*), people (*I, Rumanian women, you*), and characteristic action (*coming up to you and thrusting*), but without the narrative features of plot, resolution, and outcome.

- (2) Where I work  
       there’s a lot of women wandering around,  
       like the Rumanian women,  
       holding the kids  
       and coming up to you and thrusting

Typifying scenarios seem to be used in focus groups as a way of accessing and constructing shared understandings through presenting brief sketches of situations that assume shared evaluations and attitudes (Myers 1999).

Personal stories and typifying scenarios may be metaphorical, metonymic, or literal. While Extract (2) is a literal scenario with a metaphor inside it, lines 632–634 of Extract (1) construct a scenario which is metonymic (*faced*) and metaphorical/metonymic (*brought it all home*).

In the interpretive phase of the analysis, threads of continuity and interaction were sought across systematic metaphors, (significant) metonymies,<sup>8</sup> personal stories, and typifying scenarios.



#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1. Overall findings

The most important finding is the importance of spatial scenarios, metaphors, and metonymies in the dialogic construction of suffering others and in moral reasoning around empathy. Participants operate with a metaphorical and metonymic landscape of empathic understanding, on which a personal and private space represents perceived security. Intrusions into this space, by actual people or by charity appeals and human rights information, are felt as threatening, and the sense of threat becomes a justification in moral reasoning presented to support responses to suffering others. Alongside the denial described by Seu (2010) lies this affective landscape in which distance from the Other correlates with feelings of security or insecurity. The reasoning constructed on this landscape underpins empathic understanding and resistance to it, and supports the denial of, or withdrawal from, responsibility.

Personal, private, safe space is talked about literally and metonymically in narratives and scenarios set in the physical and concrete locations of daily life; beggars asking for money on local streets are felt to violate emotional and physical safe space. Affect attached to encounters in real places is connected through metonymy and symbolization with a metaphorical safe space around the Self. In a symbolic parallelism, charities such as Amnesty International are seen as acting in a similar way on a more global scale, potentially violating a more metaphorical personal space. Empathy flounders as apparently deserving others, both locally and globally, are perceived as a risk to personal safe spaces. The need to defend against threats is metaphorically transferred to a need to defend against charity appeals. In a kind of “Goldilocks principle,” an optimal distance for empathy—neither too close or too far away—dialogically emerges from spatial scenarios, metaphors, and metonymies.

##### 4.2. Detailed findings: local encounters with suffering others

Over half of the identified verbal metaphors relate to spatiality (295 of 538), with vehicle terms grouped as *LOCATION*, *DISTANCE*, *MOVEMENT*, *BODIES*, or *SEEING*. Examination of discourse topics revealed the particular importance of metaphors of *HOUSE/HOME* and of *CLOSENESS* and *DISTANCE* in talk about other people and their suffering. Also important was the use of *VIOLENT ACTION* metaphors in response to charity appeals.

Systematic metaphors of *CLOSENESS* and *DISTANCE* appeared early, to justify not wanting to respond to charity appeals (Extract [3]):

(3)

- 235 Tracey: but I also think  
 236 unfortunately (Q that's life Q) and,  
 237 but I for one don't have,  
 238 well,  
 239 the strength,  
 240 I don't have the,  
 241 you  
 242 I don't want to change that,  
 243 I'd rather change something closer to home,  
 244 there's other issues  
 245 Bruna: right  
 246 Tracey: that I'm more  
 247 Bruna: right  
 248 Tracey: involved in,  
 249 however awful these are.

While the phrase *closer to home* may be literally true (charitable causes in the United Kingdom rather than in Afghanistan), it also has a metaphorical use here—linked to a sense of what is personally important—and reformulated in line 248 as issues that she is *more involved in*, with the metaphorical use of preposition *in* emphasizing depth of involvement.

In conventionalized metaphors relating to *CLOSENESS* and *DISTANCE*, human embodied experience is overlaid and interacts with sociocultural experiences. In our real lives, both social and embodied nearness or being close is typically associated with people and activities that are familiar, safe, and can be trusted. The *HOME* is the place where one lives with the most significant people, the family, and represents what is (or should be) most familiar, trustworthy, and safe. These primary experiential connections of people's physical lives are absorbed into metaphorical uses of words relating to *CLOSENESS* and *DISTANCE*, including *HOME*, and their interaction expresses degrees of significance to the speaker.

The highly affective meanings of *CLOSENESS* and *DISTANCE* metaphors resonate back into metonymic uses, as real places and events take on emblematic or symbolic value and are used in talk as part of typifying scenarios about encounters with *beggars* in participants' local neighborhoods (as in Extract [2]).<sup>9</sup>

In Extract (4), metaphorical resonances of *far away* help evoke a sense of otherness and unfamiliarity as Paula explains why it is hard to respond to charity appeals about distant situations.

(4)

- 267 Paula: also because it's so far away,  
 268 yeah,  
 269 it's so far away

- 270           it's just not,  
 271           you can't imagine what it's like  
 272 Bruna:    right  
 273 Paula:    you can't begin to imagine,  
 274           so  
 275 Bruna:    right  
 276 Paula:    the only way you can imagine is if you're there.

Empathy with *far away* others is, according to this argument, made impossible by the distance; physical closeness, as being *there*, is held necessary for understanding another person's life. Physical distance need not prevent empathy; for example, one of us has a son living far away in New Zealand, but that does not prevent her imagining how he feels when an earthquake occurs. Physical distance seems here to be standing (metonymically) for something else, like perceived sociocultural or situational differences between the Self and the Other, that prevents understanding. As we see shortly, contrary to the implied logic of this argument, bringing the distant closer does not necessarily result in increased empathy.

Extract (5) describes how global changes have in recent years brought suffering, or images of suffering, closer. Combining *HOME* and *MOVEMENT* metaphors expresses the affective impact of changes in the perceived distance of the Other from the Self.

- (5)  
 598 Paula:    I think also the last couple of years  
 599           there's all the conflicts in Kosovo  
 600 Bruna:    uhm.  
 601 Paula:    and places like that in Europe  
 602 Bruna:    uhm.  
 603 Paula:    it's brought it home to us  
 604 Bruna:    uhm, uhm  
 605 Paula:    that it's not just millions of miles away  
 606           it's in Europe.  
 607 Carla:    xxx  
 608 Paula:    [and it's closer to home again  
 609           ordinary people like you or I have been suffering.  
 610           it's just terrible.

The metaphor *brought it home to us* in line 603 again uses *home* to stand for what is significant in one's life. *Bringing* something *home* is to make people newly and strongly aware of something that formerly had little significance. There is also a metonymic sense here, since television and the Internet have in recent years brought images of distant suffering instantly into homes, in

a reduction of both temporal distance and visual distance. People can see immediately what was formerly only heard or read about some time after it happened. In the last lines, the phrase *closer to home* expresses social empathy with the formerly distant Other: they can now be imagined and understood as *ordinary people like you or I*. By showing how people involved are similar to ourselves, visual images of distant conflicts make the empathic activity of imagining the *suffering* of the Other much more possible.

It might be thought that encounters with suffering people on local streets would offer increased opportunities for empathy and altruism not possible when they were *far away*. However, analysis of metaphor, metonymy, and symbolization of place reveals that this is not the case.

In a series of narratives and scenarios about “beggars”, participants speak about encounters with people asking for money in their neighborhoods: *walking down the road, in the underpass, next to the cash point, where I work*. Unexpected and undesired approaches into personal space produce feelings of threat and insecurity.

The phrase *come up to you/me* is the most frequent lexical indication of violation of personal space through coming too close, as in Extract (6) (also Extract [2]):

- (6)
- |     |        |  |
|-----|--------|--|
| 861 | Kate:  | I don't very often,                                      |
| 862 |        | I don't at all give to beggars,                          |
| 863 |        | no no.   |
| 864 |        | in fact they're quite (.)                                |
| 865 |        | annoying for me,   |
| 866 |        | come <u>up</u> to you and start pestering you.           |
| 867 | Paula: | I'm not talking about people that come <u>up</u> to you. |
| 868 | Kate:  | yeah but it's still the same <u>thing</u> isn't it?      |
| 869 |        | if a person is sitting on the floor,                     |
| 870 |        | I will give to them,                                     |
| 871 |        | but not if they come <u>up</u> to me.                    |
| 872 |        | no,  |
| 873 |        | no,  |
| 874 |        | I don't like that.                                       |

The metaphorical use of *up* in *come up to me* emphasizes both closeness and threat. Kate makes a contrast between the person who comes too close, violating her personal space and making her feel uncomfortable, and someone who sits on the floor, maintaining a certain distance. The latter is perceived as much less threatening and may receive a donation, whereas someone who comes close is seen as *pestering* and produces a negative response. The contrast made between the emotional effect of *coming up to you* and *sitting on the floor*

suggests that a comfortable affective distance is somewhere between these two positions.

Later in the discussion, Kate revisits this idea of a seated beggar. The scenario in Extract (7) comes at the end of a stretch of talk about encounters that make her feel threatened:

(7)

- 1889 But a guy  
1890 like sitting in the underpass  
1891 sitting there saying <Q have you got any money? Q>  
1892 I don't feel (threatened)  
1893 probably because he's maybe sitting down,  
1894 I don't know.

The scenario setting is *in the underpass*; the definite article signals a place, or idea of a place, familiar to other participants. The request for money, rather than a demand, comes from a safe distance, *there*. By *sitting down*, not *coming up*, the *guy* positions himself lower than her. This position reduces any threat, even in an underpass, where encounters with strangers may be felt more risky than in the light of the street above. Being *down* or lower than another person metaphorically represents submission and metonymically represents less threat.

Both physical posture and distance/closeness seem to make a difference in terms of safety/threat and decisions on giving to beggars. The relative positioning of beggar and giver, in terms of the polarities “standing giver versus beggar sitting on the floor” and “agentive giver versus passive victim,” is a graphic representation of power relations. The familiar, and therefore safe, scenario endows the giver with agency and an upright, proud position, while the beggar, as the passive victim, is in a—physically and metaphorically—lower position. Perhaps the beggar as subservient and subordinate is what is expected—how the world should be—and the beggar taking initiative, even standing up and actively engaging the giver, rather than passively waiting, creates anxiety by breaking expected but unspoken social rules of the helper–helped power dynamics.

Extract (8) presents a typifying scenario in which a person *walking down the road* is suddenly accosted by someone asking for money. Again personal space is violated by coming too close:

(8)

- 882 Carla: and you're walking down the road and suddenly somebody  
might  
883 right in front of you  
884 go,  
885 and you can't understand what they're saying  
886 and then suddenly they're off on you,  
887 they're asking you for money

The phrase *walking down the road* is used to imply minding one's own business, and its use to open the scenario sets up the *you* character as doing something normal that they are entitled to do. The violation of this activity and of personal space is highlighted by the beggar *suddenly* appearing *right in front of you* and thus blocking the direction of movement, symbolically removing the person's freedom to continue to act as they intended. Not only are action and personal space breached, but so also are social norms of conversation: the beggar asks directly for money without any mitigation (*go*); the metaphor *they're off on you*, a multi-prepositional and highly colloquial construction with sexual origins, suggests a torrent of incomprehensible words. The change of syntactic subject from *you* to *they* from line 885 marks the change in agency in the scenario; the *you* who was in charge of her own movement and direction has to yield to the *they* who blocks the way and asks for money. Social conventions of "helper–helped" interaction are again trespassed in this scenario.

A final example of local places and requests for money is the cash point (ATM). In Extract (9), three participants agree that a beggar *next to the cash point* feels especially threatening.

- (9)
- |      |         |   |
|------|---------|---|
| 1903 | Paula:  | ooh terrible xxx round here and next to the cash points.              |
| 1904 |         | xxx.  |
| 1905 |         | and that is just,   |
| 1906 |         | that just,  |
| 1907 |         | I hate that.  |
| 1908 | Tracey: | Because they know   |
| 1909 |         | I think they know you're getting notes out as well,                   |
| 1910 |         | and I just think that   |
| 1911 |         | [that's just  |
| 1912 | Kate:   | [that's horrible yeah   |
| 1913 |         | so then I would avoid a cash point if someone was sitting next to it. |
| 1914 |         | If there xxx was another one,   |
| 1915 |         | I would choose not to use that one.                                   |

Acceptable closeness varies with situation; at the cash point, a beggar sitting on the ground becomes especially threatening, even for Kate who has said she prefers people sitting down (Extracts [6] and [7]). The reason given by Tracey is that *they know you're getting notes out*. By knowing what should be private, the beggar is not only invading the physical safe space and affective safe space but also what we might call the informational private space of the person. The affective force of this encroachment on space is described with strong words: *hate*, *horrible*, and through Kate's reaction: *I would choose not to use that one*.

Not only, as the cash point example shows, does personal and private space need to feel secure, but it should also be a space in which one can trust the other to respect boundaries and stay “in their place.” Participants mention stories about beggars who are not actually in need: *professional beggars . . . making about two hundred quid a day or something*, adding a further dimension to the complexity of local encounters, and a further threat, of fraud, to personal private and safe space.

In dialogue, speakers construct a net of moral reasoning by drawing on scenarios around encounters with apparently suffering others in the local environment to justify decisions about responding to requests for money in these local, everyday contexts. We next examine how participants talked about the charity information and appeals presented at the start of the discussion, in which the suffering Other is very distant, both literally and culturally. Similar symbolic reasoning is found applied to charity appeals. The manner in which an appeal is made, particularly its relation to personal space, both physical and affective, appears to affect people’s willingness to respond at a more global scale.

#### 4.3. *Empathy and distant suffering*

Appeals like those used in this research try to bring the distant suffering Other, the raped Afghani woman or the flogged Saudi Arabian, into the imagination of the UK audience through texts and images, to increase awareness and to prompt both empathy and donations.

Participants in this particular focus group do in fact contribute to charities, and apparently quite generously. However, as Tracey says in Extract (3), they prefer charities that are *closer to home*. Charities’ efforts to make distant suffering others visible are sometimes felt to be aggressive intrusions into personal, private, and safe space. They are also perceived as potentially fraudulent or dishonest, threatening the integrity of that space. As a result, participants seem to defend themselves from intrusion by charities just as they protect their private space from beggars who come too close. Their moral reasoning draws symbolic parallels between local experiences with “beggars” and the suffering of a distant Other.

The actions of charities are described (Extract [10]) through strongly negative metaphors in which potential donors are brought very close through *VIOLENT PHYSICAL ACTION*.

(10)

- 1264 Carla: and for them to capture their audience  
 1265 so they can get them to pay the money out  
 1266 to instead of feeling all sorry for themselves.

Violent physical action is metaphorically carried out on people's emotions in order to *capture* or persuade them. The *audience* once *captured* has to remain in the emotional and financial place dictated by the charity, i.e., continuing to donate.

Carla continues by describing how charities succeed in getting donations, as *drawing out* (like blood) or *reeling in* (like a fish caught on the end of a line).

(10) continued

1275 Carla: it's the way they  
 1276 they try and draw the money out of you,  
 1277 and the message they use  
 1278 Bruna: right  
 1279 Carla: to do that as well,

...  
 1294 but they seem to reel you in

The metaphors paint charities as trying to control donors through *VIOLENT PHYSICAL ACTION* that brings, and holds, them close.

Other participants use the very strong *VIOLENT PHYSICAL ACTION* metaphors when talking about being educated about other cultures (Extracts [11] and [12]):

(11)

2334 Paula: People don't want to be,  
 2335 have politics rammed xxx down their throat all the time.

(12)

3030 Tracey: I don't think it should be,  
 3031 you know,  
 3032 shoved down their throats,  
 3033 but I just think you should be looking at different countries  
 around the world

The metaphors of *ramming/shoving down their throats* create strongly negative, hypothetical scenarios in which potential donors are subjected to intimate, invasive actions by those with the information, contrasted in (12) with the more comfortable metaphor, *looking at different countries*.

Strongly negative metaphors are frequently found in this reasoning strategy of creating extreme hypothetical scenarios that make the alternative seem an obvious choice (Cameron 2011a; Markova et al. 2007). The natural response of keeping a safe distance from violent actions, evoked by the *VIOLENT PHYSICAL ACTION* metaphors, supports moral reasoning that justifies avoiding charity appeals.



In responding to requests for money, non-metaphorical scenarios are also used to justify keeping a safe distance from charities, to avoid being asked repeatedly for money (Extract [13]). Like the beggar at the cash point, charities seem to want to know too much about financial affairs that should be private:

(13)

1286 Carla: it's almost like  
1287           once they get your address that's it.

...

1341 Kate: Once you've filled in one of these little boxes then they,  
1342           they write to you every couple of months and  
1343           (S/yeah)  
1344           ask for more and.

In a parallel to the possibility of fraud in local encounters with *professional beggars*, participants bring up the issue of the possible dishonest use of donated aid money and use it in dialogical reasoning to justify not donating to charity.

While the suffering Other at extreme distance may be, as we saw in Extract (4), beyond imagining, and beyond empathy, aggressive charity appeals seem to block empathy by bringing the distant suffering Other too close, rather like aggressive approaches from beggars in local streets. How then do participants justify knowing about distant suffering Others but deciding not to help?

Participants speak of two ways in which they resolve this moral problem, both of which circumvent charities and their uncontrollable demands: (a) going toward the Other while remaining in control of personal space and distance, and (b) working within a safe metaphorical distance by contributing to charity at home.

The first strategy takes the Self physically toward the Other, thus maintaining control of the space between Self and Other. Carla speaks with satisfaction of volunteer work in South America:

(14)

2142 Carla: When I went on a xxx,  
2143           in South America  
2144           and the sense xxx of community  
2145           when we helped them there  
2146           and make  
2147           physically being able to help out is more important I think  
2148 Bruna: uhm  
2149 Carla: because we,  
2150           we built (.)  
2151           a erm

2152           a xxx for school kids there  
 2153           and we all also tarmaced a school floor  
 2154           so they could actually have a classroom as well

By travelling to South America and living in a community, Carla experiences life physically close to the Other. The global becomes the local; circles of empathic understanding extend to encompass the Other as a real person rather than a cipher or distant blur. At the same time, she maintains agency and control, doing the charity work herself.

For some people, the distant suffering Other never comes close enough for empathy. Instead, attention is focused on charitable actions close to home.

(15)  
 2166   Stacey: I helped  
 2167           my Aunt's in er a home xxx for epileptic women  
 2168           and she's mentally handicapped as well  
 2169           and every year I'll,  
 2170           the whole family run the store er  
 2171           at the,  
 2172           their summer fete  
 2173           and that's our,  
 2174           then that's  
 2175           again that's personal,  
 2176           you know  
 2177           it's my Aunt there,  
 2178           my Mum's sister so,

The repeated use in Extract (16) of family lexis—*my Aunt*, *the whole family*, *my Mum's sister*—emphasizes how family connections drive Stacey's decisions about charitable action. Her family is closest to home in both literal and metaphorical senses, and fits easily within a local circle of empathic understanding.

## 5. Discussion: a Goldilocks principle of empathic understanding

The analysis shows how participants use physical space and distance to describe their feelings and emotions when asked for money in encounters within their local environment. *CLOSENESS/DISTANCE*, *HOME*, *SEEING*, and habitual locations, such as *walking down the road*, *in the underpass*, and *next to the cash point*, are used with figurative and symbolic meanings as participants explain how being approached and asked for money threatens a personal space that should feel secure and private. That space is not only physical, but also—through the use of metaphors and symbolizations—affective and informational.

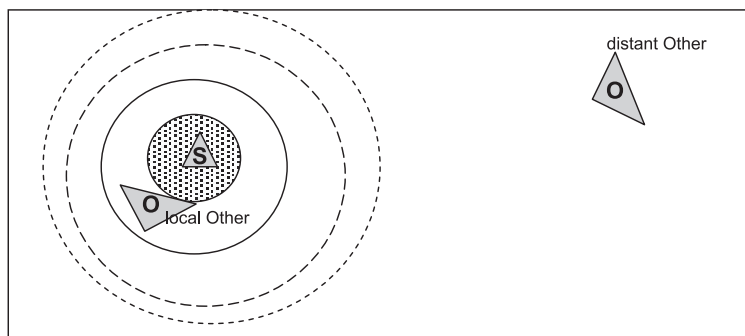


Figure 1. *Metaphorical landscape of empathic understanding*

Avoidance of such encounters or choosing not to respond to requests become ways of protecting the personal, private, and safe space. Negative responses to charitable appeals emerge from a net of dialogic moral reasoning that works through metaphor to create an analogous landscape of empathy.

Participants' metaphorical use of spatial language produces three degrees of symbolic distance, related in a kind of "Goldilocks principle" of empathy and giving,<sup>10</sup> and pictured in Figure 1. Movement across distances in the metaphorical landscape represents the possibility of empathic understanding between Self and Other, of being able to imagine or "enter into" the Other's feelings and perspectives:

- Extreme distance: being so far away that people's lives and suffering are out of reach, cannot be imagined. Empathy becomes impossible.
- Extreme closeness: coming too close, threatening personal space. Empathy is blocked.
- Just right: maintaining an optimal distance—the other being near enough to be seen and understood but not entering the personal space. Empathy is possible.

The Self is shown as a triangle at the center of circles emanating outwards, the (suffering) Other as triangles at varying distances. The first, shaded, circle around the Self represents the physical and metaphorical space that must be kept as personal, private, and safe. Helping families within this space is an accepted moral responsibility. Trespass by others inside this space, by aggressive charity appeals or local beggars, causes feelings of threat and insecurity resulting in defense, protection, and avoidance; empathy is resisted or blocked. The local Other, positioned beyond the personal safe space but still close enough to be seen and understood, like the local beggar sitting in the underpass, is felt to be non-threatening; empathy becomes possible. As distance

from the Self increases, the Other recedes from imagination, and is no longer available to empathy. Charity appeals or information aim to enlarge the reach of empathic understanding so that the distant and suffering Other becomes imaginable and available for empathy.

Physical distances represented by the radiating circles are not fixed, but change with context and experience: more physical distance is needed at a cash point than in an underpass. An optimal distance for empathy varies with situation and individual, and is determined by different factors, not least one's overall ideological position vis-à-vis what constitutes a deserving victim and an appropriate response.<sup>11</sup> Support for global responsibility would invoke an intention or attitude to empathy with no limit to its reach (the outer circle).

Theories of embodied cognition predict that physical experience contributes to and constrains patterns of thought at the individual and the cultural level. We see here something of the specificity and mechanisms of those processes. The data, particularly the typifying scenarios, show the type of embodied experience that participants work with in dialogic reasoning. To activate shared experience, speakers report encounters with generalized but not abstracted individuals; descriptions of movement and location stand in for details of appearance, and known places become emblematic of shared experiences that happen in them. Significantly for theories of embodied cognition, the experiences that people draw on are not just interactions with the physical world but interactions with other people; embodied cognition is social and interpersonal. Because of its concern with movement through and in spaces and places, embodied social cognition is also dynamic.

## **6. Implications**

Embodied experiences in the physical and social world, with their uncertainties and perceived threats, have been shown to contribute to a metaphorical landscape of empathic understanding, and to provide scenarios, metaphors, and metonymies used in explaining decisions to others. The symbolic connections found between people's embodied experiences, their moral reasoning, and their empathic understanding of distant suffering others have important implications for charities who want to raise awareness and funds for international work. On the broader social level, the findings help to understand how increased uncertainty in people's lives can affect their empathy to others, both locally and globally.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged: concentrating on a single focus group limits possible generalizability. Any claims of generalizability stem from the stabilized nature of the social representations that lie behind the talk. The often minimal references made by speakers as they present typifying

scenarios, and the unproblematic co-construction of both scenarios and the moral reasoning attached to them, provide evidence that these focus group participants come with a large degree of shared experiences and shared cultural models/narratives. They can thus be taken as somewhat representative of a larger social group.

What is generalizable from the study is the use of embodied experience in decision making and reasoning about others. The denial of responsibility for other people, in the face of information about their suffering, as found by Seu (2010), undoubtedly exists; this article has uncovered some of the affective factors and the reasoning that work alongside denial, and the connection between the denial and people's everyday embodied experiences in the places where they live and work. Moral reasoning applied to global issues seems to operate in a parallel way to its local application in everyday lives. Empathy toward the suffering Other emerges as correlated with metaphorical distance between Self and Other, while at the same time constrained by a need to create certainty and security in a metaphorical personal space around the Self. There is an optimal distance for empathy, in which the Other is neither too close nor too far away from the Self. If that personal space is encroached upon, people become more protective. Increasing uncertainty sends people deeper into their personal safe spaces.

What then might be done to tackle this denial, to adjust the empathic landscapes that people construct through their everyday experiences? We suggest three types of action to build on our findings, applicable not just to charities but more widely. At the individual level:

- widening the reach of people's circles of empathic understanding;
- dismantling blocks to empathy;
- and socio-politically: challenging the moral climate and its support for empathy toward suffering others, both close to home and more distant.

### 6.1. *Widening the reach of empathic understanding*

The study found that, even in a situation of increasing globalization, moral responsibility toward others is constrained by the reach of the individual's empathic understanding. Increasing empathy requires finding ways to support people in tolerating expansion of their safe space to include unknown and distant others.

A first step toward widening circles of understanding is to incite empathic curiosity for the Other's situation (Halpern and Weinstein 2004). Film, broadcast media, drama, and novels can all contribute to presenting the Other in ways that allow connection across distance and that open up the complexity of their world.

For charities wishing to raise money to mitigate distant suffering, it may be productive to present information using structures of embodied moral reasoning that people will recognize as similar to their own. The data show that people accept responsibility for close personal and family connections; they are also inspired by people who “go out there,” by stories of charity workers in the field who they can identify with. Combining these raises the possibility of using stories about family connections in distant places to increase awareness and financial support, e.g., South African grandmothers taking care of AIDS-orphaned grandchildren. If people see others overseas responding to suffering in ways that they themselves recognize as morally right, then they are likely to feel more empathy, hopefully leading to altruistic action.

### 6.2. *Dismantling blocks to empathy*

In their fund-raising activities, charities need to be aware of potential emotional blocks to empathy and to find the necessary distance, the “just right” position from which to ask for money. If people are likely to be protective of their personal space, both physical and emotional, wanting it to stay private and secure, then we can predict that methods of raising funds that intrude on this space are unlikely to be well received and will have a long-term negative effect. Unsolicited phone calls and stopping people in the street are precisely the kind of boundary-violating activities likely to make people feel uneasy.<sup>12</sup>

The study reinforces the need for education about global suffering and its causes while also suggesting that the impulse to empathy can be quite easily overwhelmed by reactions to too much or too strong information, for example revulsion produced by images of horrendous suffering.

People’s specific concerns about dishonesty and fraud need to be dealt with rather than ignored, since they are invoked to deny the need to respond to suffering.

### 6.3. *Challenging the moral climate for empathy*

The tight connection of the experiential and primary with the attitudinal and affective means that empathy toward others may be compromised by threats that people perceive, or are led to perceive, in their daily lives. In our primary embodied and affective experiences, families will always be more special to us than strangers; homes will always be safe places that we want to protect; the unfamiliar will always present as a potential threat. However, perceived threats to personal space locally are not just individual/emotional but also social/ideological. While personal affective responses cannot be ignored, their rooting and reinforcement at the social level must be recognized. Action on all levels is needed: feelings of perceived threat on the personal and local level

need to be acknowledged before they can be addressed or challenged; the responsibility of political and media discourses about the Other in creating a climate for empathy must be taken seriously. To widen circles of empathic understanding requires a supportive moral climate which in turn presents a challenge of moral leadership that speaks to power.

## Appendix: Transcription conventions

,	slight fall in intonation
.	pause or fall in intonation
?	rising intonation
⟨Q . . . Q⟩	quoted speech or thought
xxx	indecipherable
(.)	pause
[	indicates overlapping speech
<u>Words</u>	words or phrases used metaphorically

## Notes

1. See the appendix for the transcription conventions.
2. The original study was funded by a Leverhulme Trust grant awarded to Irene Bruna Seu.
3. The “Living with Uncertainty” project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council through a Global Uncertainties Research Fellowship awarded to Cameron [RES 071-27-0039].
4. The term “verbal metaphor” refers to metaphors constructed in talk or text. It is used in preference to “linguistic metaphor” which, in conceptual metaphor theory, refers to linguistic instantiation of a pre-existing conceptual metaphor. Where unambiguous, “verbal metaphor” is shortened to “metaphor.”
5. All names are pseudonyms. The original research project received ethical approval from the Department of Psychology following Birkbeck College’s ethics procedures and guidelines.
6. Systematic metaphors—sets of connected verbal metaphors used across a discourse event—are written in small italic capitals.
7. This part of the method has developed from long experience of working with metaphor in talk. Although metaphors theoretically have both vehicle and topic (the literal entity that the metaphor refers to), explicit topics are often absent in spontaneous talk; fairly broad “key discourse topics” are found to work adequately to code and search data. Erroneous interpretations are minimized by the researcher (a) knowing the data well and (b) returning frequently to the transcript (Cameron et al. 2009).
8. Not all metonymies were identified—this is a much more complex task than metaphor identification.
9. Some of the findings of this study, particularly around spatial metaphors, fit with the discourse space approach of Chilton (2004), although there are differences in our theoretical starting points and goals.

10. Goldilocks principles have been applied in cognitive psychology, astronomy, and economics. The name refers to the avoidance of extremes; in the original story, Goldilocks avoided porridge that was too hot or too cold, etc.
11. Ideally, the diagram would morph to show changing empathy/distances between Self and Other; the constraints of a static diagram require this to be left this to the reader's imagination.
12. The label for this process, "chugging"—*charity* + *mugging*, indicates the violation of personal space commonly felt when approached in the street by charity workers.

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